

Kindergarteners Go Bilingual
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The photo is by Jeff Lagasse/ Staff Photographer, Journal Tribune.
Spanish teacher Genevieve O'Connell shakes hands with second grade student Kaitlyn Palmer during the "Buenos Dias" song Monday, Nov. 23 in Spanish class at Mildred L. Day School in Arundel.

ARUNDEL < Ask a Mildred L. Day School kindergarten student how his or her day was and you're likely to get an answer you won't understand. That is, if you don't speak Spanish.

Now that Arundel is part of Regional School Unit 21, students in kindergarten through second grade are learning Spanish twice a week as part of a program that began in Kennebunk/ Kennebunkport last year. It's the perfect time to learn a language, said Principal Tom Parker. They're learning to count, their colors, shapes, how to tell time. All the things they're learning in one language they're also learning in two. If you can get kids from the get-go to think in two different languages, they'll be

better off.

The program is scheduled to grow with the students until it is expanded through to grade five, if budgets allow. Instructor Genevieve O'Connell, a University of New Hampshire graduate, also studied the language while living in Mexico and Puerto Rico. She previously taught elementary and special education Spanish in Massachusetts and is now traveling between classes in Arundel and at the Consolidated and Kennebunk Elementary schools. Another instructor covers the remaining classes at KES.

K-2 is so fun, they're so filled with joy, she said. It's absolutely necessary to grow up knowing another language; to not have it is crazy. If the program can expand so that today's kindergarten students continue their Spanish education, they will be fluent by graduation, she said. It'll be interesting to see in seven or eight years if students are taking advanced levels of Spanish and what the impact on the high schools will be, said Parker. Currently, Arundel students are contracted to attend Thornton Academy Middle School but have their choice of area high schools.

O'Connell said her style is to use a lot of songs, puppets and body movement to instill the language in students, rather than translating English into Spanish. In class Monday, students enthusiastically sang the "Buenos Dias" song, complete with arm movements, and responded to Spanish instructions to raise their pencils or color a worksheet.

When students go to Spanish class, the content is similar to what they're learning in their regular classrooms, just in another language. A calendar with weather graphics, colored bean bags and other posters in Spanish adorn the walls of the Spanish room, which was formerly the superintendent's office before consolidation took place last year.

Culture is also integrated into the course, with O'Connell sharing the ways of the different people she met during her language studies. It's not just the Mexican holidays and traditions, but a variety of Latin American customs that O'Connell imparts, from playground games to the Day of the Dead to Christmas. No tests or grades are given in Spanish class, she noted.

I want them to grasp it, to teach it to their brothers and sisters and their parents - and remember it for next year, she said. First grade teacher Cathy Bansmer doesn't speak Spanish, but she's learning right along with her students and has set up vocabulary words and posters in her classroom to supplement their learning. They need to hear it all over the place, otherwise it's just down there (in the Spanish classroom), said Bansmer.

Though the young students can't read yet, she does have some Spanish books on hand so they can become familiar with the words and is hoping that the school will receive a grant for Spanish children's books on CD. When

students want to learn how to say a phrase in Spanish, she finds out from O'Connell and posts the commonly used phrases in her classroom.

Viajo por autobus, is near the door: I'm waiting for the bus. It has to be broadening their horizons, said Bansmer. I ask them how they are in Spanish and they respond - now they're learning how to ask me. Items throughout the school are labeled in Spanish, from the fish tank (acuario) to the bathrooms (banos). The labels, along with the efforts of the classroom teachers to integrate Spanish learning, show kids it's a valued program and Spanish is worth the effort, said O'Connell.

Parker said some residents would have preferred that the students be taught French, since French Canadian heritage is strong in southern Maine, but understood why the school system chose Spanish. The decision was made to prepare children globally, he said.

Spanish is the fastest growing language in the U.S., though not necessarily in Maine, said O'Connell. They're going to need to know Spanish just to get by.

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